

Language and Writing Skills Acquisition for Multilingual Learners



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Researchers in a variety of disciplines agree that the capacity for excellent oral and written communication is one of the most important skills students need and that it is a key component for success in today's world (Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2002; Bates, 2006; Morreale & Pearson, 2008). In a recent corporate survey of 1,000 business leaders from all over the globe, "leadership and communication were the top two skills seen as most critical for business success." (Hult / EF, 2021, p. 4). As the digital age grows and develops, writing has become increasingly more important. As Vacca et al. state, "Adolescents entering the adult world in the 21st century will read and write more than at any other time in human history.

They will need advanced levels of literacy to perform their jobs, run their households, act as citizens and conduct their personal lives" (2021, p. 89). As teachers, we know how important excellent oral and written communication skills are for success in school. Writing is also critical to students' ability to express their understanding of content and concepts and to help teachers assess students' understanding of what they have learned. However, teaching writing continues to be a challenge for many teachers, especially for teachers of students who are multilingual learners (Moses & Mohamad, 2019).

Vista's English language and literacy development programs **Connect to Language, Literacy, and Content** (K–6), **Bridges to Literature and Content** (6–8) and **Engage with Literature and Content** (9–12) integrate research-based writing practices for multiple purposes, including writing to build writing stamina; writing to respond to text; writing to build writing skills; writing to inform, persuade, or narrate; and writing to learn the writing process.

Research has shown three concepts to be consistently helpful in successful writing instruction: 1) scaffolding instruction; 2) motivating student writing through content; and 3) using collaboration to create a community of writers.

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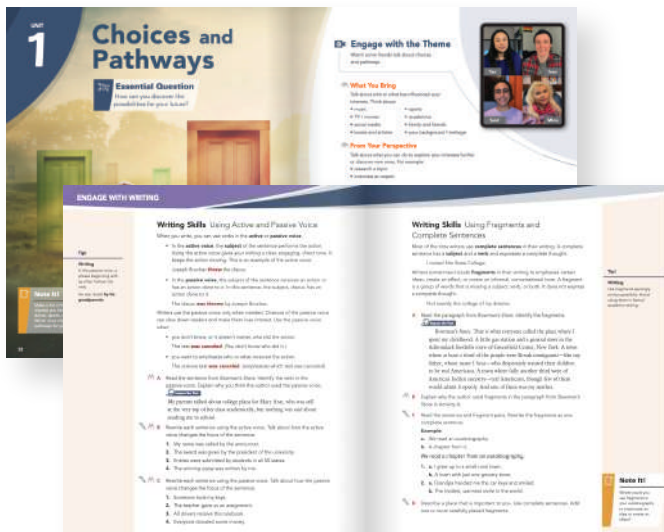
1) Scaffolding writing instruction

The benefits of helping students increase their writing skill capacity and fluidity with scaffolded support have been supported by research for many years (Cunningham & Allington, 2003; Fisher & Frey, 2007; Faraj, 2015; Graham, et. al 2016; Spycher, 2017). Scaffolding helps students succeed by making the component whole a bit smaller and easier to digest. It can also allow students the time they need to figure out new and sometimes challenging ideas. In teaching writing, scaffolding is especially important, as the writing process is a complex and sometimes confusing one for many students—especially for those who are new to and still learning the basics of the English language.

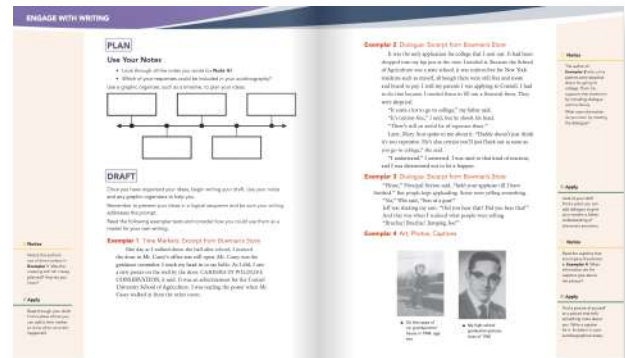
Connect, Bridges and Engage are built around unit themes that include a Big Idea and Essential Questions. In each unit, students build writing skills and learn strategies through purposeful scaffolding. Students work through the writing process after developing rich content knowledge, building graphic organizers, and focusing on writing skills. Models provide students with examples of what excellent writing might look like.

These models also give students examples to help them learn how to write in a variety of writing styles. Built-in process writing steps guide students to complete and present their writing assignments in a systematic, step-by-step way that helps break down and de-mystify the writing process.

In **Engage**, each unit includes a section entitled “Engage with Writing” where students learn and practice essential tools for writing. Student models and process writing steps are also included to help guide students to complete and present writing assignments. Engage also has a “Note It!” feature that is introduced at the beginning of the unit and is incorporated throughout the unit to help students build a notebook of important details, graphic organizers, thoughts, connections, short writing activities, etc. that will help them with the final writing project.



Engage A, Unit 1



Engage A, Unit 1

2) Using engaging content to support writing instruction

In recent years, reading scholars and researchers have argued that solid content instruction in the elementary grades should not be ignored. Some suggest that it can actually help increase reading proficiency (Pondiscio, 2014; Shanahan, 2020; Hwang et al., 2022). Research has shown that students who are exposed to thoughtful, progressive, grade-level-appropriate content instruction show greater gains in vocabulary, comprehension, and writing. (Snow, 2005).

Some have argued that student achievement gains have also been seen on standardized tests when, for example, more social studies content is taught. (Tyner & Kabourek, 2020). English learners can be especially positively impacted (August & Shanahan, 2006; Fisher et al., 2008; Proctor, et al, 2011; Baker, et al., 2014). Weaving content and writing instruction together has also been argued as a method for improving student capacity in both understanding content and in writing. (Tardy, 2006; Wilcox, 2011; Hochman & Wexler, 2017).

In Vista's **Connect**, **Bridges** and **Engage** programs, a consistent pattern of units built on engaging and motivating content helps students build knowledge. These engaging science and social studies topics present students with a wide variety of interesting, student-focused content about which to practice their academic writing. Students learn speaking and writing strategies through meaningful content and apply the content to their ELA practice, thus marrying the goals of ELA success, writing, and content learning. Authentic texts and content-driven lessons are offered through print and digital resources to build capacity and address the proficiency needs of each student.

Connect 3, Unit 1

Bridges B, Unit 1

| Sport | Men | Women |
|-----------------|-----|-------|
| Baseball | 7.1 | 0.0 |
| Basketball | 4.3 | 2.4 |
| Football | 1.1 | 1.1 |
| Baseball | 4.8 | 0.0 |
| Tennis | 1.1 | 5.0 |
| Track and Field | 4.1 | 4.2 |
| Volleyball | 1.1 | 1.1 |

Engage A, Unit 1

3) Collaboration and group writing

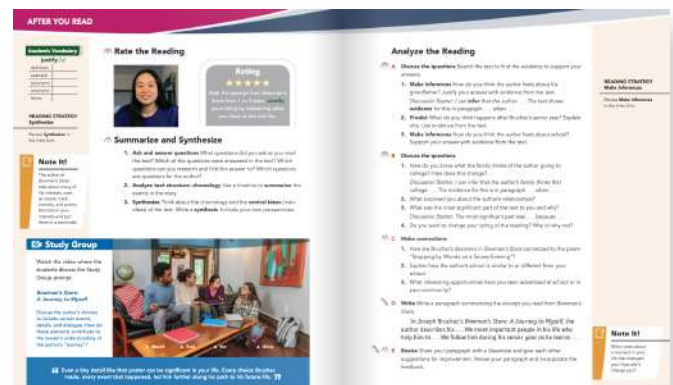
No one should go it alone. Students learning to write need support and challenge from peers and teachers. They also need to understand writing as a public act—writing meant not only for themselves, but also for their readers. Much research on writing in a variety of settings, both domestic and international, has shown the practical benefits of collaboration on student achievement and fluency in writing (Foley & Thompson, 2003; Lowry et al., 2004; Yong, 2011, Talib & Cheung, 2017; Storch, 2019). Group writing and project-based writing can have a positive effect on students’ writing capacity across the grades. As recommended in reports on teaching writing at the K–12 level from the Institute of Education Science, US Department of Education (Graham, et al., 2016;Graham, et al., 2018), teachers should “create an engaged community of writers” by using these steps:

1. Be a model to students and participate in the community by writing and sharing their own writing.
2. Give students writing choices.
3. Encourage students to collaborate as writers.
4. Provide students with opportunities to give and receive feedback throughout the writing process.
5. Publish students’ writing and extend the community beyond the classroom.

Vista begins this writing practice with encoding and writing at a granular level in their K–12 newcomer program, **Get Ready!** This progresses to forming more complex sentences and building longer pieces in **Connect** and then practice at higher levels in **Bridges** and **Engage**.

In all Vista ELD programs, students and teachers have access to a variety of tools to help build a community of learners and a community of writers, which is especially important as students learn the writing process. Scaffolds both within and throughout the programs include both teacher and student modeling, while explicit writing instruction gives students opportunities to practice their oral and writing skills through communication. For example, students can record their answers, listen to playback, and then connect them to writing. This type of practice ensures that students who are taking extra steps to translate have the scaffold they need to transfer thoughts into writing.

Students develop both Tier II and academic vocabulary as they move through a thematic unit and then use these new terms to develop writing skills. An example of modeling and thought/writing development in **Engage** is a feature called “Study Group.” These Study Group activities encourage students to build a community around a shared reading and then express their own ideas about the text, using both oral language and their writing skills.



Engage A, Unit 1

Students use these opportunities to learn and apply new tools and then to practice their writing skills. Interactive tutorials and video virtual chats found on the program’s digital media site are another way that students see how a community of peers can support their writing capacities and make them more comfortable about writing in school and beyond.

In the **Bridges** and **Engage** programs, support for a community of peers can be found throughout each unit. At each unit’s start, students are challenged by both “What You Bring” and “From Your Perspective” activities to share their unique perspectives and listen to peer perspectives which address students’ self-awareness and activates their prior knowledge.

Engage with the Theme
Watch some friends talk about choices and pathways.

What You Bring
Talk about who or what has influenced your interests. Think about:
• music • sports
• TV / movies • academics
• social media • family and friends
• books and articles • your background / heritage

From Your Perspective
Talk about what you can do to explore your interests further or discover new ones. For example:
• research a topic
• interview an expert

In This Unit

Anchor Reading
from *Seamark* by Joseph Beattie
"Stopping by Woods" by Robert Frost

Listening and Sp
Podcast: "Luck"

Media
I Am: A Document

Grammar
• simple verb form
• progressive form

English Language
Non-Lit: Liu Xiaobo
Henry Home, May
Stephen Van Mar

ENGAGE WITH THE THEME

- Exchange information and ideas. Write on the board: What determines your pathways and choices? Have students discuss factors that they think shape and influence them. Ask: What music or drama about becoming an explorer or scientist?

VIDEO: ENGAGE WITH THE THEME

- Organize and organize ideas. Play the video and check for understanding. Prompt with questions such as: Who are the characters? What do they want to do? Why? Encourage students to add their own ideas. Then, as a class, identify characters' ideas about what influences their choices and interests. Organize ideas into a chart on the board. Check students' opinions for qualifications (Strong/weak/positions, likes/dislikes, hobbies, other people, childhood dreams, experiences, research).

WHAT YOU BRING

- Preview words, phrases, and expressions. Draw attention to the list of possible influences, and ask a few students to read the items aloud as you check their understanding of terms, including academic, background/heritage, and article. Emphasize that each student's choice will be unique.
- Build language and comprehension. As students discuss their influences, circulate to monitor comprehension and use of words and expressions. Model corrections, clarify terms when necessary, and take notes on recurring errors for later modeling. Ask students to copy each influence item in their notebooks and write at least one influence for each.

FROM YOUR PERSPECTIVE

- Show points of view. Ask students to identify read and then consider the two ways that students can explore their interests. Elicit and discuss how each might influence a personal interest. Model a response such as: Engineers are passionate about their subject. Talking with an expert can make me more curious about it.
- Participate in oral exchanges of information. Have students discuss in pairs their own ways of exploring interests. Have them share their answers as a class, and ask: Which ways are the most common? Tally the results on the board.

IN THIS UNIT

- Preview. Arrange students in small groups to preview the unit. Tell them to look through the contents and talk about what they see. Ask them to notice and share an interesting photo or title they see as they skim through the unit. Then, have students share what they will read and learn about in the unit.
- Preview. Assign each group a section of the unit (Media, Language Arts, Science, Social Studies, Mathematics, or Pathways). Have them identify their selected section to the class by reading aloud the titles, showing the pages, and briefly stating what they will learn.
- Make predictions. Ask: How do you think these selections will connect to the unit theme? Have students make predictions.

DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

Scaffold

- Read a table of contents. Ask questions to confirm basic comprehension: How many selections are in this unit? How can you identify the author? Ask a student to read aloud the article title of the Science section. Say: That article is by Doug Johnson. Ask a student to read aloud the title of another selection and ask: Who is that by? Confirm with students stating the title and author.

Amplify

- Make connections. Ask students to review the titles of the seven selections in this unit. Have students select the one that sounds most interesting to them and explain why that is. Then, have them create a KWQ chart (what they know, what they want to know) for each of the seven selections. Encourage students to tip or the selection and aim for the main idea. Check students to see their charts for when they read the selections. They will then complete the charts with the "C" (what I learned) column.

Engage A, Teacher's Guide, Unit 1

Building strong, confident writers is a goal we share for all our students—especially those learning English. While the work can be challenging, every teacher needs supports like those found in Vista’s high-quality materials. Teachers should keep in mind the powerful ways that scaffolding writing instruction, using strong content as motivators and supports for emerging student writers, and building a community of writers in their classroom can make a positive difference in every student’s life and educational experience.

Dr. Kevin Colleary is an adjunct professor at Fordham University’s Graduate School of Education in New York. His research and publications focus on social studies education, knowledge curricula, content area reading, critical thinking, digital literacy, second-language learners, diversity issues, best practices in teaching and learning, and helping teachers understand how to develop content-driven literacy instruction at all grades. Dr. Colleary’s most recent publication is *Ensuring a Better Future: Why Social Studies Matters*, published by Gibbs-Smith Education. He has authored numerous chapters in a wide variety of educational texts and has been published in a variety of professional journals. Dr. Colleary received his BA in history from Siena College, Albany NY. He also earned both his master’s and doctorate in education from Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

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